

HERO HATERS by Ken MacQueen

EXCERPT

Prologue

Spokane, Washington, August 2019

Local hero Anderson Wise can't remember the last time he paid for a drink at Sharkey's.

Nor can he remember an embarrassing assortment of the women who selflessly shared their affection, post-Sharkey's.

As for that last blurry night at the gin mill, he wished to hell he'd stayed home.

The bar's owner, Sharon Key, hence Sharkey's, took joy in chumming the waters on Wise's behalf for a regular catch of what she called "Hero Worshipers."

She saw getting him laid as partial repayment for saving her eleven-year-old grandson Toby's life some eighteen months back.

A disaffected dad, high on crystal meth, stormed into Toby's classroom to take issue with his kid's latest report card. He showed his displeasure by shot-gunning the teacher, then reloaded and asked all A-students to identify themselves. Being A-students, they dutifully raised their hands, Toby among them.

As the high-as-a-kite shooter herded the high achievers to the front of the class, Wise, the school custodian, charged into the room armed with a multipurpose dry-chemical fire extinguisher. He blasted the shooter with a white cloud of monoammonium phosphate, to minimal effect, then slammed the gun out of his hands. It discharged into the floor sending several pellets into Wise's left foot. Thoroughly pissed, Wise ended the drama by pile-driving the extinguisher into the shooter's face.

Sharon Key, a widow in her early sixties, subsequently replaced the beer signs and dart board with blow-ups of the laudatory press Wise earned during the tragic aftermath. The front of the next day's local paper held pride of place. It carried a photo of Wise, extinguisher in hand, under the headline: Greater Tragedy Averted as Hero Janitor Extinguishes Threat. The story contained a pull

quote in large font which Wise came to regret: “ ‘It’s a versatile extinguisher,’ the modest 30-year-old explained, ‘good for class A, B and C fires—and meth-heads.’ ”

Said famous extinguisher now guards the top-shelf booze behind Sharkey’s oak-and-brass bar.

New stories were added to Sharkey’s wall five months back after Wise was awarded, with much publicity, the Sedgewick Trust Sacrifice Medallion— one of the most prestigious recognitions of heroism that American civilians can receive.

Wise’s liver and a lower part of his anatomy took a renewed pounding in the weeks thereafter. So much so he declared a moratorium on visits to Sharkey’s for reasons of self-preservation.

He was back in the saddle a month now, but his attendance was spotty. “This hero stuff,” he confided to Key one night, while slumped in his chair. “Maybe it’s too much of a good thing?”

“Ya think?” Key muttered as she took inventory of that night’s limited offerings.

It wasn’t just the women. Men often bought him drinks too, happy to bask in the reflected glory of a proven manly man.

Two weeks ago, some weedy academic from back east interviewed him at Sharkey’s and staked him to an alcohol-fueled dinner at the city’s best chop house. The brainy one expected Wise to opine on such things as “neo-Darwinian rules for altruism.”

Asked him if he’d been motivated by “a kinship bond” with anyone in the room?

Er, no.

Wondered if Wise knew that a disproportionate number of risk takers are working-class males?

Nope, sorry.

And had he calculated in the moment that a heroic display of “good genes” would make him a desirable mating partner?

Cripes. Really?

“Don’t know what I was thinking,” Wise said, swirling a glass of something called Amarone, a wine so amazing angels must have crushed the grapes with their tiny, perfect feet. “Heard a gun blast, grabbed the fire extinguisher off the wall. Saw the dead teacher, all those kids, and a nut with a shotgun. Did what anybody would do. I spent three years in the army after high school, mostly in the motor pool. Much as I hated basic training, maybe some of it stuck. Who knows?”

The academic gave a condescending smile and called for the bill, his hypothesis apparently confirmed.

Wise fled to the restaurant toilet and took notes on the back of his pay slip. Back home, he Googled the hell out of studies on “extreme altruist stimuli,” on “empirical perspectives on the duty to rescue,” and after many false starts, on theories of “Byronic and Lilithian Heroes.”

He kinda got the concept of “desirable mating partner”, but he was pretty sure his dick didn’t lead him into that classroom. Did it?

While not a reflective guy, Wise had to admit it was creepy to reap the fleshy benefits of his few seconds of glory while his dreams were haunted by visions of teacher Adah Summerhill slumped over her desk, blood pooled beneath her. So much blood. With the shooter sprawled unconscious, Wise gently lifted Adah’s head.

She had no pulse and her eyes, once so vibrant and expressive, were as empty as an open grave. She’d always been nice, and totally out of his league.

So, here he was, back at Sharkey’s, mind made up.

Key arrived at his “courting table” and set down his Jack and ginger ale.

“Gave my notice at the school,” he told her. “Getting outta here for a while. Got that Sedgewick money to spend. Someplace they don’t know me. Mexico, maybe.

Or Costa Rica.”

Key patted his hand. “Knew this was coming, Andy.

You banged every eligible female in town, pretty much.

And some who shoulda been out of bounds. I’m amazed the Tourist Bureau doesn’t list you as a top-ten attraction, up there with the botanical gardens.”

“All I want, Shar, is to be liked for me, not for something I did because I happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. Or is that the other way ’round?”

“Hey, you’re a good-looking guy. Still got that shaggy blond baseball player thing going for ya.

Might’ve taken a run at you myself if my hips weren’t shot.” She patted his cheek. “Made you blush. Now don’t turn into a beach bum down there. Always thought you aimed too low, mopping floors and washing windows for the school board. Time to stretch—”

She craned her neck toward the door after it opened with a bang. “My, my, here’s one for the road. She was in earlier, asking after you.” Key aimed a nod at the door and whispered, “Don’t strain anything.” And headed to the bar.

Wise looked up and...sweet Jesus.

Early twenties, he guessed. His eyes roamed from strappy sandals, up a long expanse of tanned bare legs to a glittering silver dress that started perilously high-thigh and ended well below exposed shoulders. The ripe promise of youth was on full display, like she'd dipped her bounteous curves in liquid lamé.

She drew every eye in the place as she undulated to his table. Full red lips, high cheekbones, chestnut hair piled high. Up close now, her gimlet eyes were at once innocent and knowing, like a debauched choirgirl.

"Hi, hero." Her voice was low and sultry, as he knew it would be. She remained on her feet, hands on the table, leaning low to full effect. "When you finish that drink, I really want to see your medal."

**** He remembered her mixing drinks back at his apartment while he retrieved his medallion from the sock drawer in his bedroom. He remembered her running a sensuous thumb over the bas-relief portrait of Philip Sedgewick as she read aloud the inscription: "The most sublime act is to set another before you."

That wondrous voice lingering over "sublime act,"
like it was lifted from the Kama Sutra.

And like too many times, post-Sharkey's, damned if he could remember her name—that evil bitch. He awoke, bouncing in the back of a van, hands and legs cuffed to rings set in the floor. A broken-glass headache served notice of every bump in the road.

Another lost night at Sharkey's.

Wise had a dreadful feeling he'd never be back.

Chapter One

Aberdeen, Washington, July, one month earlier

Jake Ockham was one kilometer in, one kilometer to go and already in a world of pain. Lungs, legs and palms, always the damned palms, screaming enough already.

He'd whaled away on his Concept II rowing machine for thirty minutes, building up to this. Stripped off the sweatshirt after ten minutes, the t-shirt after twenty-five. Down now to running shoes and gym shorts, his torso gleaming with sweat despite the morning chill.

He'd rested after a thirty-minute warm-up to gulp water and to consider the need to reinforce the pilings under the creaky wooden deck before it dumped him and the ergometer into the Wishkah River below. Might leave it in the river mud if it came to that.

Full race mode now, one kilometer in, another to go.

The erg's computer showed the need to pick up the pace to break the six-minute barrier, something he'd regularly shattered a decade ago during his university rowing days.

Thrust with the legs, throw back the shoulders, arms ripping back the handle. Return to the catch and repeat.

Five hundred meters to go. Eyes fixed on a duck touching down on the river, looking anywhere but the screen.

Two hundred and fifty meters. Faster. Harder. Don't lose the technique.

Fifty meters. You can do this.

A final piston thrust of legs, shoulders, arms and...six minutes, thirteen seconds.

"Fuck!" His roar startled the duck into flight.

He slumped over the machine, gasping for air, ripping at the Velcro tabs of his gloves, throwing them on the deck in disgust. Hated those damned gloves, so essential these days.

Head bowed, he heard the cabin's door rasp open.

"Such language." Clara Nufeld, his aunt, and technically his boss as publisher of the Grays Harbor Independent, leaned against the doorframe.

He didn't look up. "Don't bother knocking. Make yourself at home."

"I did, and I am. Got a couple of things to show you.

Right up your alley. Might be pieces for next week's issue."

She was lean and tall, in tight jeans and a faded Nirvana sweatshirt, her spiked white hair cut short. At sixty-four, she still turned heads. Jake knew her age to the day, Clara being his mother's identical twin. Connie, his late mother, fell to breast cancer at age forty-five.

So much of his mother in Clara. So much that when Jake finished high school and rode his rowing scholarship east to Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, his father, Roger Ockham, moved his accounting business to Bend, Oregon. Said it was for the golfing, but Jake suspected the sight of his late wife's twin was a constant reminder of his loss.

Connie and Clara, fresh out of university, worked for their father at the Independent, Clara on the advertising side, Connie as a reporter.

They took the helm of the paper after Derwin Nufeld—their dad, Jake's grandfather—collapsed and died mid-way through crafting a fiery editorial on a mule-headed decision to pull *The Catcher in the Rye* from the high school library.

After Connie's death, Clara did double duty as editor and publisher until she succeeded six months ago in luring Jake home to Washington State from Pittsburgh to take over as editor-in-chief.

This five-room stilt home, Clara's former cottage on the tidal Wishkah, was his signing bonus.

One of the dwindling numbers of real estate ads in the Independent would describe the cabin something like: "A cozy oasis on the Wishkah, surrounded by nature and just minutes from the city. Fish from your deck while contemplating the possibilities for this prime riverfront property. A bit of TLC gets you a rustic getaway while you make plans for your dream home."

After years in urban Pittsburgh, he awoke now to bird chatter and the sights and scents of the moody, muddy Wishkah—its current pulled, as he was pulled, to the infinite Pacific.

Jake gathered his shirts and gloves and cringed at a sniff-test of his underarms. "I'll keep my distance." He waved Clara inside. "What's up my alley?"

She waved two dummy pages, the ads already laid out, plenty of blank space for him and his skeleton staff to fill with stories and photos.

Jake was still adjusting to small-town journalism, covering at least one earnest service club luncheon every week, puffy profiles of local businesses, check presentations, city council and school board meetings.

And jamming in as many names as possible. He'd done some summer reporting for the weekly during his high school years, but rowing had occupied most of his time.

Clara handed off a page proof with a boxed advert already laid out. “A new doctor is taking over old Doc Wilson’s practice, thank God. I swear the last medical journal that old man read was on the efficacy of leeches and bloodletting.”

Jake nodded. Worth a story for sure. A few words from Wilson about passing the scalpel to a new generation, then focus on Dr. Christina Doctorow. No hardship there.

The ad for her family practice included her photo.

Rather than the cliché white coat and stethoscope she wore hiking shorts and a flannel shirt with rolled sleeves, thick dark hair in a ponytail, a daypack hanging off a shoulder. A husky at her side gazed up adoringly.

Smart dog.

Jake put her at early thirties, his age more or less. He nodded approval. “Sporty. A fine addition to the Grays Harbor gene pool.”

“The woman’s a firecracker. Spent ten minutes haggling down the price. I finally caved. Said I’ll bump this up to a half-page, but you owe me a free checkup.”

“Seriously?”

“What she said, too. Also asked ‘Is that ethical?’ I said, ‘darling, I’m in advertising. You want ethics, deal with my nephew on the editorial side.’ “

Jake laughed. “Pretty good at bloodletting herself.

What else you got?”

“This is so up your alley.” She handed him a classified ad page-proof. “You being an expert.”

Jake slumped onto a kitchen chair. “On what?”

She tapped a one-column boxed ad in the lower left, “Heroes.”

“Not hardly.”

He looked closer and reared back. The heading read: “For Sale. Rare Sedgewick Sacrifice Medallion. \$100 OBO.”

There was a thumbnail photo of the medal’s obverse, showing the craggy face of Philip Sedgewick, a leading member of the long-dead school of industrialist robber barons. He’d amassed a fortune in textile mills, newspapers, and exploitive labor practices. Awash in cash he came to philanthropy late in life. Like others in this elite group—Carnegie, Mellon, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, et al—their names and reputation-burnishing generosity live beyond the grave.

Sedgewick, at his wife's urging, chose to celebrate extraordinary acts of heroism. He used eight of his many millions—an enormous sum in 1901—to endow a family trust to award exceptional heroism with the Sacrifice Medallion and needs-based financial assistance. Over the past one hundred twenty years, the trust awarded some eleven thousand medallions, an inspiring legacy of courage, and yes, sacrifice.

The grainy photo in the classified ad was too small to read the inscription under Sedgewick's stern visage, but Jake knew it well. It was a quotation by the English poet William Blake: "The most sublime act is to set another before you."

Below the photo was a post office box address, and "mail inquiries only."

Jake shook his head. "This is nuts. The price is insanely low, insulting really. The medallions are kinda priceless."

"I wondered about that," Clara said. "The ad cost fifty dollars so not much of a profit."

"The rare few that get to auction can fetch in the thousands. We try to buy them back, prefer that to having them land up in the hands of the undeserving."

Clara cocked an eyebrow. "We?"

Jake shrugged. "I still do the occasional freelance investigations for Sedgewick. The thing is, there's never a good reason to sell these. Either the recipient is dead broke, or dead without relatives to inherit it. Or it's stolen."

"Or," Clara said, resting a hand on Jake's shoulder, "the hero feels undeserving."

He flinched. "Was there a photo of the medal's back? It'd have the recipient's name and the reason it was awarded."

"Don't even know who placed the ad. Arrived in the mail: a photo, the ad copy, and a fifty-dollar bill. No return address but the post office box."

"Pull the ad, Clara. I'll buy it and return the money.

There's a story here, something's not right."

Clara toyed with her car keys. "I feel bad sometimes, guiltin' you back. Do you miss it, your old life back in Pittsburgh?"

His pause was barely discernable. "Great to be back in the old hometown."

"Great to earn half the salary you did in the big city?

Great to prop up the family business? Great to be stuck with your old aunt?"

“Aunt doesn’t cover it. I was twelve when Mom passed. You stepped up for Dad and me.”

She looked like she was about to say something, then shook her head and flashed an enigmatic smile. “A topic for another day. Gotta run.”

She leaned across the table, took his hands in hers, running her thumbs lightly over his scarred palms. She raised his hands to her lips for a kiss, then turned for the door.

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